A Hundred Years On:
Recent and Changing Views on the History of the First World War

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I. Introduction

The impetus of the one-hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War of 1914-18 has provided opportunities for the re-evaluation of both historical understanding of the war, and of its commemoration and remembrance. [1] With the deaths of the last war veterans, the war must be understood in terms of remembrance rather than of memory, as well as in terms of its history. As fresh findings have emerged from the investigation of historical evidence, so the history of the war has been greatly modified, and these new historical findings have begun to impact on the approach to the study of remembrance. The last decade (or so) of historical research has been characterised by a new openness and new approaches, as well as fresh controversies. These have included several recent publications on the war's origins and outbreak, on its conduct in both military and social terms, and on its aftermath. In many areas of research, old assumptions and national or regional histories, and narrower methodological approaches, are being replaced by the beginnings of a real global history for what was truly a world war.

II. A Great Global War

There is no single perspective on the history of the First World War that could ever embrace the entire war and all its consequences. The discussion of the historical understanding and commemoration of the war in this paper has been shaped by the choices made in placing it within the context of British and German cultures of remembrance a hundred years after the war's outbreak. This anniversary has also provided an opportunity to reflect on how much

[1] This paper was originally given as the keynote address to the 33rd annual conference of the Prinz-Albert-Gesellschaft E.V. / The Prince Albert Society, *Der Erste Weltkrieg in der deutschen und britischen Erinnerungskultur / The First World War in British and German Commemorative Culture*, 4-6 September 2014 at Andromedasaal Ehrenburg Castle Coburg, Germany; as its author I am grateful to Professor Dr Frank-Lothar Krull for the invitation to speak and for making my participation in the conference such a pleasant one, to Dr Beatrice Heuser, and to my colleagues at the University of Wolverhampton, UK.

our wider knowledge of that terrible war has increased in recent years. It is popularly assumed that knowledge fades over time, as personal memory becomes scarcer and more remote. But for an event as large as the First World War the opposite has proved to be true, largely in consequence of the release and uncovering of new evidence. As historians, we know considerably more about the war than was known fifty years ago, and certainly far more than any one individual did at the time, except perhaps about their own immediate personal experience. But as a reflection of the choices in perspective that we must make as historians, there is scarcely a word in common between this present paper and a paper that I contributed in 2008 to a conference and book sponsored by the Australian War Memorial to mark the ninetieth anniversary of the end of the war.[2] That paper stressed the wartime contributions of the countries of the British Empire, and the truly revolutionary changes in our recent understanding of the *military* history of the war, particularly the tactical and technological developments of the Western Front, that led to the Allied victory. This present paper, intended chiefly for a German and wider European (including British) readership, reflects more the political, social and cultural aspects of the war; and inevitably the war's outbreak rather than its ending. This includes the contribution to the present historical debates of historians who are of German birth or origin, but who have found their intellectual homes in Britain or other parts of the English-speaking world. It also reflects the importance given to studying the history of Germany in the first half of the 20th Century, especially the First and Second World Wars, by a strong and distinguished group of British historians who, beginning their careers in the 1960s with the implications of the 'Fischer Thesis', have challenged the idea of the German 'special path' (*Sonderweg*), and tackled the 'big questions' of recent German history.[3] In my own career as a historian, which has embraced both the military and the cultural history of warfare, including much work on the First World War, I am pleased to have the opportunity to summarise this new knowledge.

Even so, this was truly a global war, and it needs an even more far reaching approach to its history to encompass it. After decades of European emigration to the rest of the world, the First World War caused a brief reversal of this trend, with unexpected and sometimes lasting consequences. There are many illustrations of this: Japanese sailors in 1917 walked the streets of Malta; while Germans in France found themselves fighting – among many other

[2] *Stephen Badsey*: Ninety Years On: Recent and Changing Views on the History of the First World War. In *Ashley Ekins (ed.)*: 1918 Year of Victory: The end of the Great War and the shaping of history. Titirangi NZ 2010, 243-259.
[3] *Neil Gregor*: Encumbrance of things past. Review of *Richard J. Evans*: The Third Reich in History and Memory. New York 2015. Times Higher Education. 19 March 2015, 54.

nationalities – at first Sikhs from the Punjab and Ghurkhas from Nepal, and then later on fighting Americans from Wisconsin, a state that in 1910 had a majority who spoke German as their first language. Although on the Western Front the war ended at 11.00 a.m. (British time) on 11 November 1918, the fighting did not. What may be called the 'aftershock wars' or 'successor wars' to the First World War continued in regions as diverse as Mesopotamia, Ukraine and Ireland well into the 1920s. How to expand the scope of the history of the First World War was shown at the turn of the millennium by the monumental collaboration between German and American scholars studying the nature of total war, orchestrated by the German Historical Institute in London.[4] Only a decade later, the sheer breadth and depth of the current approaches to the First World War has been well illustrated by the publication in 2014 (in English and French) of the new three-volume *Cambridge History of the First World War*, edited by Jay Winter.[5] This encompassed the work of scholars of many nationalities, ranging across all countries and cultures affected, from narratives and theatres of war through to the broader role of the state at war, and the role of civil society including the war's aftermath and memorialisation.

III. Cultures of Remembrance

The centenary anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War has been a particularly piquant challenge, which the British have taken extremely seriously. In October 2012, at the main London site of the Imperial War Museums, Prime Minister David Cameron announced plans for an extensive British official commemoration programme for the First World War which has now started, and which is intended to last until the end of 2018.[6] For the British (and for most English-speakers), and in contrast to the rest of Europe except for Belgium, it has always been the First World War rather than the Second World War which was the great tragic event of the 20th Century. The central paradox of the British experience of the First World War is that the war enjoyed massive popular support from the British civilian

[4] The proceedings of successive conferences have been published: *Stig Förster and Jorg Nagler*: On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861-1871. Cambridge 1997; *Manfred F. Boemeker and Stig Förster* (eds): Anticipating Total War: The German and American Experiences, 1871-1914. Cambridge 1999; *Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (eds)*: Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914-1918. Cambridge 2000; *Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (eds)*: The Shadows of Total War: Europe, East Asia, and the United States, 1919-1939. Cambridge 2003; *Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (eds)*: A World at Total War: Global Conflict and the Politics of Destruction, 1937-1945. Cambridge 2004.

[5] *Jay Winter (ed.)*: The Cambridge History of the First World War, 3 volumes Cambridge 2014). / La Première Guerre Mondiale. 3 volumes Paris 2013-14.

[6] Speech by Prime Minister the Rt. Hon David Cameron, at the Imperial War Museum, London, 11 October 2012, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/speech-at-imperial-war-museum-on-first-world-war-centenary-plans

population from start to finish, and also largely from the populations of the British Empire; Great Britain also emerged from the war as a victor, with its territory largely unaffected, its empire at its greatest historical extent, and with its war dead – both in absolute and proportionate terms – fewer than those of France, Germany or even Italy. Despite its financial losses, Great Britain might even have been a net creditor from the war, if the emerging Soviet Union had not reneged on all the Russian Empire's debts. But more than any other major power, Great Britain then almost immediately turned against the idea of war as a future instrument of policy, so that by the early 1920s it had become impossible for any British mainstream politician to seriously advocate deliberately embarking on a war as a praiseworthy act. This phenomenon is now explained partly by Britain being largely a satisfied power in the aftermath of the war, at least in terms of its international security, and also by the extreme cultural shock to a country unused to peacetime conscription, and afterwards deeply disturbed both by what it had needed to do to win, and by what the consequences of another major European war might be. British commemoration of the First World War has always been first and foremost about the dead: at once its most personal and the most nationally and publically visible aspect.

A century after the event, a sizeable majority of British people wish to see the First World War commemorated, and mostly they wish this commemoration to be about the dead, and about the war's consequences for their lives today. What are for many historians the more important questions about the war – how and why it was fought, and how and why it was won – attract less British public interest. There is also a considerable British concern to avoid triumphalism. It was only with difficulty that historians have persuaded the British government to include a centenary commemoration of the Battle of Amiens of August 1918, General Erich Ludendorff's famous 'black day of the German Army' and as good a marker as any for the moment at which the war was lost and won, alongside commemorations of British defeats or heavy losses, such as the Battle of the Somme in 1916 or the Third Battle of Ypres (usually known to the British as Passchendaele) in 1917.[7] In present day remembrance, it is fundamental to the foundation myth of the European Union that the three great Franco-German conflicts – the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, the First World War of 1914-18 and the Second World War of 1939-45 – should be seen as European civil wars, in which all Europe and its civilisation was the loser, and in which any discussion of victory is therefore

[7] For an interesting recent discussion as to whether the Battle of the Somme should be considered an Allied or German victory see *William Philpott*: Bloody Victory: The Sacrifice on the Somme and the Making of the Twentieth Century: The Battle, the Myth, the Legacy. New York 2009.

meaningless. This sits well with the perspectives of present-day Great Britain, a multicultural and diverse modern state for which the values of the British Empire of 1914-18 are very remote indeed. But it does not sit well with the myth of a unified and victorious Great Britain in the First World War, or with the importance of the wider British Empire to that victory. It is particularly hard to reconcile the idea of the First World War as a European civil war with the cultural perspectives of present-day Canada, Australia and India. For the various successor states of the British Empire and their governments, responses have been as diverse as their geographical and cultural spread. Probably no country is placing more importance on the centenary commemorations than Australia, which for decades has seen the First World War as central to its own defining national foundation myth. The responses from countries such as India and Canada have so far been rather more ambiguous. It has also proved hard to reconcile this narrative with the historical traditions formed in the old pre-unification German Democratic Republic, which like the Soviet Union took the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 as the defining event that separated the Great War 1914-17 from the subsequent revolutionary wars 1917-1922.

The impact of the First World War at the time on British society was so considerable that national government plans for commemoration of the war began in Great Britain before the war itself had actually ended, in 1917 with the establishment of the Imperial (later Commonwealth) War Graves Commission, and of the Imperial War Museum.[8] The Museum began at once to collect and preserve documents and other evidence, including the world's first national film archive, with particular attention paid to the role of British women in the war, and to the wider role of the British Empire. Commemorations of various kinds about the war have taken place ever since, and in recent decades cultural historians have produced a wealth of valuable studies on their forms and meanings. But for this centenary anniversary there are two important differences. First, the very last *Frontkampfer*, the veterans of the war, are dead; there is no longer any adult personal memory of the First World War, no matter how tenuous or controversial. Although as with the loss of nay human life this is perhaps a sad fact, it is not necessarily of great historical significance. Oral historians have long been aware of the doubtful value of personal memories at such a distance in time. But in today's world it is only a collective cultural memory that remains, presenting the challenge that any collective memory will be at variance with some of the known facts about the war. In

[8] Originally and briefly known as the National War Museum, the change of name to Imperial War Museum was made in late 1917; a further change to Imperial War Museums was made in 2011 to reflect its different sites throughout Great Britain.

essence, the study of commemorative cultures of war is the study of how people who are not historians have got their history wrong.

The second great difference between the centenary anniversary and studies that historians have made of previous commemorations is that this time as historians we are inside the experiment, taking part in the commemoration. By perhaps early 2019, historians will have a first tentative knowledge of what has happened, and of what part historians have played in it. This is probably the one time in their lives that the present generation may think seriously about the First World War, and it represents a unique opportunity to push the boundaries of imagination and knowledge. In January 2013, Sir Hew Strachan, the only historian of the First World War on the British government's advisory panel for its commemoration (a fact that in itself speaks volumes about the British approach) warned publicly that if the planned official commemoration 'simply reworks the familiar themes of remembrance, it will be repetitive, sterile and possibly even boring. If we do not emerge at the end of the process in 2018 with fresh perspectives, we shall have failed'.[9]

IV. The British 'Two Western Fronts'

The origins of our present historical understanding of the First Word War may be traced back about fifty years to the 1960s, to when the generation that fought in the First World War began to die of old age, leaving behind an immense mass of letters, memoirs and other evidence, supplemented by the release into the public domain of large numbers of official documents relating to the war. In the British historical tradition, publications based on this new evidence have within recent decades rewritten much of the history of the war, from the politics and grand strategies of nations through to the tactics of the battlefields, and the attitudes and beliefs of the soldiers and civilians, replacing an older narrative based chiefly on published evidence consciously provided by elites. Known originally for convenience as the 'revisionist' perspective (a term that has, of course, been used in many other cases, but has been particularly associated with new British views of the First World War) this approach to the British contribution to the war also coincided to a large extent with the shift in the understanding of Germany's war aims begun with the work of Fritz Fischer. This British revisionism in turn has prompted historical investigation into a most unusual cultural phenomenon that is still with us. The 1960s was also the time of the great youth cultural revolution and its challenge to established values. In effect, it was a rejection by many of the

[9] *Hew Strachan*: 'First World War Anniversary: we must do more than remember'. Daily Telegraph 11 January 2013.

young of the values of their grandparents, and that meant the values and social assumptions with which the First World War had been fought. This led in Britain from the 1960s onwards to an interpretation of the experience of the war couched in terms of irony and rejection. If over the subsequent decades British historical revisionists have been arguing *against* anything, it has been against the position taken in Paul Fussell's classic early work of cultural criticism *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975), that the First World War had been such an exceptional and dislocating event that it could not be understood as history at all, but only through its elite literature. This debate has now largely run its course, and much of what was once revisionism may be now seen as orthodoxy among British historians. What remains a historical puzzle is how – and also *when* between the 1920 and the 1960s – the older elite interpretation of the First World War became almost universally accepted into wider modern British popular culture, to the extent that present-day public 'remembrance' of the war bears very little relation to its actual history. While this puzzle has been well explored by the work of Dan Todman and David Reynolds in particular, its implications for the very concept of any 'commemorative culture' of the First World War are considerable.[10]

It was in the 1990s that, among English-speaking historians, this new revisionist understanding of the First World War came into collision with the emerging work on the cultural history of the war coming from France and Germany. Whereas cultural historians stressed a 'long war' in the sense that the impact of the First World War may be considered to have never ended, along with the tragic nature of the conflict, the revisionists were concerned with the war in its own context and how it was perceived by people of the time. For cultural historians the war was a profound and enduring human tragedy, while the revisionists drew on evidence for contemporary mass public attitudes, and stressed the fact of a British (and Allied) victory. In the worst aspects of the ensuing debate, while cultural historians joined some political historians in emphasising the war's global nature and complexity to the point of virtually neglecting the fighting, some revisionists became obsessed with military details down to artillery shell calibres. When cultural history drew on French postmodernist theory to discuss the war, many British revisionists, trained in a strong empiricist tradition, literally could not understand what they were saying. By the end of the decade the central problem to be overcome had been identified: most cultural historians and theorists took as their baseline the older view of the First World War, based on elite perspectives, that the new evidence

[10] See *Dan Todman*: The Great War: Myth and Memory. London 2005; *David Reynolds*: The Long Shadow: The Great War and the Twentieth Century. London 2013; and also *Paul Fussell*: The Great War and Modern Memory. Oxford 1975.

unearthed by the revisionists was simultaneously destroying. It was about this time that I characterised the debate in terms of their being 'two Western Fronts', to reflect the existence of a historical Western Front of the revisionists in contrast with the Western Front of the imagination of literary and cultural studies.[11] The rifts between historians caused by this clash of ideas about the First World War were largely healed in 2007, very appropriately at the ninetieth anniversary conference of the Battle of Passchendaele held at Ypres Cloth Hall. It is now accepted that in order to understand the First World War we must approach its political and military history and its cultural or 'long' history as related perspectives rather than as separate, and with the same rigorous attention to facts and evidence.

The impact of the cultural approach and of the importance of remembrance on mainstream political and military history of the First World War is now evident. It has become usual for major works on battles or on diplomacy to include a chapter or at least a discussion on the influence of cultural research findings, or the longer term imaginative and cultural results. By way of illustration, it is increasingly difficult to discuss British perspectives on the Battle of the Somme in 1916 without reference to the British official documentary propaganda film made at the time, also called *Battle of the Somme*, which smashed box-office records on its release and which is gradually becoming recognised as the essential starting point for any discussion of British civilian understanding of the Western Front at the time, and perhaps of popular understanding ever since. However, although cultural *historians* of the First World War have largely embraced its new military and political history, many scholars approaching the war from other disciplines, including literature and anthropology, still base their perspectives heavily on historical works that were classics of their time, but are now considerably out of date.[12]

V. Evidence Gaps and Problems

The war's centenary has offered the chance to collect yet more evidence, this time across much of Western Europe, including Britain and Ireland, starting in 2008 with the work of the Oxford Digital Archive. In a simple and non-invasive process, people are presently being invited to come forward with their letters, diaries, medals, and other war memorabilia, not to donate them, but to loan them for a few minutes while they are digitally photographed and their provenance is recorded, with the resulting images to be placed on the web, often with

[11] See *Stephen Badsey*: The British Army in Battle and Its Image 1914-18. London 2009; *Brian Bond*: The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History. Cambridge 2002.
[12] See for example the contrasting perspectives in *Fred Bridgham (ed.)*: The First World War as a Clash of Cultures. London 2006, particularly the editor's Introduction.

open access. Already, thousands of pieces of evidence have been recorded in this way. Many national and official archives are also making their material available on the web, including important film records made available through the European Film Gateway's *EFG 1914 Project*, which opened in 2014. Once again it will take decades to work through such a substantial increase in evidence, and the extent to which the material now being gathered will confirm or contradict our findings so far is one of the most exciting prospects for the future of First World War historical study. However, for every step forward there is also a step back. One of the continuing problems of First World War studies is that the best documented national war effort is also the most unusual: that of Great Britain with its massive navy, its improvised mass army, its homeland largely untouched by the fighting, and its unique global empire. It is an accepted feature of modern understanding of the First World War that the further east across Europe historians have looked, the more they have found higher proportionate casualties, greater levels of disruption and dislocation, and more cases of disregard for what were then established laws and conventions intended to mitigate the effects of war. To this should be added that the further eastwards historians look, the harder their work becomes in obtaining access to archives and evidence, and to establishing even the basic facts and events. The National Archives of Great Britain at Kew are well known for being a pleasure in which to work; and increasing digitisation of Australian and Canadian war records means that the distances from Europe are no longer always the obstacle that they were. To consult the French official records at Vincennes still sometimes requires immense patience. Research into the German conduct of the war has always been hampered by problems of evidence, including the loss of the Prussian Army's records in 1945, although English-speaking historians are increasingly aware of the importance of the Bavarian Army's records in Munich. There is a notorious lack of documentation relating to Austria-Hungary, while changing political circumstances have made access to historical records in Russia increasingly difficult. The war against the Ottoman Empire, with its continuing modern resonances remains under-researched, and even with immense goodwill on all sides there are many practical problems in accessing Ottoman records. Interest is increasing in the Indian Army of the British Raj, the largest all-volunteer army in modern history, recruited chiefly from what is now northern India and Pakistan, and which played the major role in the defeat of the Ottoman Empire; but important documents still remain inaccessible. In fact, there is still so much about the First World War that remains unknown, or on which the evidence may change, perhaps with the rediscovery of an underused archive or the chance opening of a

filing cabinet. We need to be less certain, and to hold our theories like a feather on the back of the hand; they are only our best assessment at the present time.

It may be that major gaps in the archives and the evidence, in comparison with the detailed work of the last fifty years on Germany, France and Great Britain, have partly attracted some historians to make speculative claims about events further east, particularly in respect of the origins and outbreak of the war. While such theories may be conjectural or even wrong, it is important that they should be wrong in an interesting way. A bad historical theory or controversy will rapidly turn in upon itself, becoming a rather bad-tempered clash of unsubstantiated opinions, often about trivial or unprovable matters; a good theory or controversy is outward-looking and productive, forcing all historians back to the primary evidence and to an examination of the origins of the assumptions underpinning the existing orthodoxy. It is a trite observation that there has never been an *absolute* consensus on what or who caused the war, nor is there ever likely to be one. A recent and well-written summary briefly discusses eight main historical theories on the reasons for the war's outbreak, and then dismisses all of them as unsatisfactory.[13] But it has been both expected and encouraging that the war's centenary has produced a number of new perspectives on its origins and outbreak, (even disregarding a number of conspiracy theories and books of little historical merit).

The chief reasons for this lack of consensus lies partly in the events of the outbreak of the war themselves, and partly in the evidence available to us today. Both in July-August 1914 and throughout the rest of the war, the governments of the major powers all went out of their way to deflect responsibility for its outbreak in public away from themselves. It was notably a major theme of German political calculation during the crisis of July-August 1914 to attempt to emulate Bismarck's success in appearing blameless over the outbreak of his war with France in 1870-71. In those countries with some form of mass representational politics, chiefly France, Britain and Germany (and in 1917 the United States) politicians felt it necessary to explain their country's entry into the war to their people in simple terms: essentially that they were defending themselves. A fundamental long-term flaw in the German government's position was the gap between its promise to its people that the war would be both short and defensive against an unprovoked attack by Russia, and its military

[13] *Margaret MacMillan*: The War That Ended Peace: How Europe Abandoned Peace for the First World War. London 2013. xxi-xxiii.

strategy of an immediate attack on Belgium and France, with the main propaganda enemy rapidly shifted to being Britain, and the promise of a short war unfulfilled.[14]

Whatever ordinary people may have thought or told themselves in July-August 1914, none of the governments of the major powers were certain that this would be a short war, and the phrase 'over by Christmas' was never used by any high official, except possibly in hope or in irony. Although famously Kaiser Wilhelm II told his departing troops that they would be home 'before the leaves fall from the trees', this was not a statement agreed or cleared by his government. For France, it was not hard to explain the war to its people as defensive, but it was never promised to be short. The British government was quite open with its people about expecting a long war, and calling for volunteers for a mass army that could not be trained and ready for at least another year. Britain was not directly attacked, and the British cabinet was in July 1914 deeply divided about entry into the war. In recent years, French and German historians have successfully challenged the idea of mass war enthusiasm or crowds cheering for the war from its immediate outbreak, and the same findings have now been extended to Britain and to Ireland.[15] Consequently, although the massive German violation of Belgian neutrality in early August had not been the chief consideration among Great Britain's political decision-makers a week or so before, it was the event that united both the government and the people against what was seen as a real threat of future invasion, and made the British declaration of war certain. From start to finish, for the British people the war was about the German invasion and occupation of Belgium, and it was considered to have ended when Belgium was liberated. This also included the attitude of the British nation-in-arms as represented by the British Army; in October 1918, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig (commanding the British Army on the Western Front) warned his government that his soldiers would not understand continuing the war further by invading Germany.

This evidence points to what is arguably a significant methodological flaw that has marred several recent books on the outbreak of the war. With some exceptions, in their narratives political and diplomatic historians stop almost with the first shots in July-August 1914, ignoring the next few months of the war's conduct and its wider impact.[16] This may

[14] This is most completely explored in *David Welch*: Germany, Propaganda and Total War 1914-18. London 2000, revised paperback edition: Germany and Propaganda in World War I: Pacifism, Mobilization and Total War. London 2014.

[15] See notably *Catriona Pennell*: A Kingdom United: Popular Responses to the Outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland. Oxford 2012.

[16] Exceptions which cover events up to early 1915 include two works by American scholars: *Michael S. Neiberg*: Dance of the Furies: Europe and the Outbreak of World War I. Cambridge Mass 2011; and *Geoffrey Wawro*: A Mad Catastrophe: The Outbreak of World War I and the Collapse of the Habsburg Empire. New York 2014.

seem good international law, distinguishing *ius ad bellum* (the legality of entering into the war) from *ius in bello* (the legality of conduct during the war), but it is not good history. Little distinction could be made at the time between the war's outbreak and its first crises, either by political leaders or by the mass of the people, and the declarations were followed at once by dramatic events which played an equally critical part in determining the war's nature. One answer to the apparently hackneyed question as to what caused the First World War is that it was caused (in the sense that its nature was determined) by the discovery over the few months *after* its outbreak that it could not be fought and won by methods considered before July 1914. Put even more simply, the nature of the First World War was determined by the deadlock on the Western Front, and it ended only when that deadlock was broken; a fact that places German-Anglo-French military events squarely at the heart of the war's discourse, as part of a wider re-integration of the military history of the war with its political and cultural history that has been a marked feature of recent historiography.

VI. The Post-Fischer Consensus?

Despite the impossibility of any absolute agreement by historians on the outbreak of the First World War, by the start of the new millennium there existed what Annika Mombauer has usefully described as the 'post-Fischer consensus', strengthened by newly available documentation and other evidence.[17] This consensus represented a move away from the 'structural' explanations for the start of the war that had developed in the 1920s and 1930s, and had remained tenable into the 1970s. In these explanations, all the major powers involved (and even minor powers, especially Serbia) bore responsibility for the outbreak of the war to some extent, but the main explanation lay in the existing political, economic and cultural undercurrents. The revelations of new evidence started by Fritz Fischer shifted this towards a variety of 'contingent' explanations, whereby one or more powers could be shown to have deliberately sought war in July 1914. Although there have always been proposals blaming Great Britain, Russia or France, the post-Fischer consensus among historians has been that the government (rather than the people), of Germany – and with increasing emphasis the government of Austria-Hungary – deliberately sought war, although in neither case was the war that they got the war that they had wanted or expected. The idea of the *Sonderweg*, of Imperial Germany's attitudes towards the conduct of war both before and after 1914 as

[17] *Annika Mombauer*: The Origins of the First World War: Controversies and Consensus. London 2002; see also the collected documents, *Annika Mombauer (ed.)*: The Origins of the First World War: Diplomatic and Military Documents. Manchester 2013.

revolutionary or exceptional when compared to other European states, has been greatly strengthened by recent pathbreaking historical research. This has included work on the contemporary laws of war by Isabel Hull,[18] a monumental biography of Kaiser Wilhelm II by Joh Röhl, and a valuable military biography of Moltke as chief of staff by Annika Mombauer, works which between them provide strong evidence for a German government intention for war in 1914.[19] After several decades of near-adulation by military historians (notably in the United States) of the German Army of 1870-1945, both recognition of its shortcomings and criticism of its warfighting methods are now growing. This includes increasing acceptance of the fact of German Army war crimes in Belgium in 1914 and later. Information is also starting to emerge as to the extent of Russian Army war crimes against German civilians in East Prussia in August 1914; and Austro-Hungarian Army war crimes against Russian and Serbian civilians.[20] In 1914 the commencement of hostilities by almost all European armies, including the Ottoman forces in November, was accompanied within a very short time-frame by an accompanying large-scale massacre of civilians; the exceptions to this general rule being the French and the British.

Just as it took decades for the post-Fischer consensus to emerge among historians, so it will take an equivalent time for the new challenges made to it to be evaluated. One approach, championed in part by Holger Afflerbach and by Michael Neiberg, marks a return to a more structural explanation, with the idea that war was seen as becoming less and not more likely as every crisis before July 1914 was successfully resolved.[21] But if the structural idea of an inevitable war appealed as a historical model to 1960s theorists wrestling with the possibility of nuclear war, so this belief that the crisis of July 1914 could also have been defused and the old order preserved has somewhat derived from the peaceful ending to the cold war in the 1990s, and the forming of the European Union. But unlike the earlier structural approach, this view still places responsibility for the war on small numbers of highly-placed political decision-makers, rather than on large and impersonal social forces or

[18] *Isabel V. Hull*: Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany. New York 2005; and A Scrap of Paper: Breaking and Making International Law during the Great War. Ithaca 2014.
[19] The three-volume biography is: *John C.G. Röhl*: Young Wilhelm: The Kaiser's Early Life, 1859-1888. Cambridge 1998; Wilhelm II The Kaiser's Personal Monarchy, 1888-1900. Cambridge 2004; and Wilhelm II: Into the Abyss of War and Exile, 1900-1941. Cambridge 2014; an abridged version is: *John C.G. Röhl*: Kaiser Wilhelm II: A Concise Life. Cambridge 2014. The Moltke biography is *Annika Mombauer:* Helmuth von Moltke and the Origins of the First World War. Cambridge 2001.
[20] See the interesting comparison by *Alexander Watson*: Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War 1914-1918. London 2014. 127-200; also *John Horne and Alan Kramer*: German Attrocities 1914: A History of Denial. New Haven 2001; Jeff *Lipkes*: Rehearsals: The German Army in Belgium, August 1914. Leuven 2007.
[21] *Holger Afflerbach and David Stevenson (eds)*: An Improbable War? the Outbreak of World War I and European Political Culture Before 1914. New York 2007; *Neiberg*: Dance of the Furies (Note 16).

on a groundswell of popular opinion demanding war. This approach also does not conflict with the idea that the political and military leaders of Germany actively sought war in July 1914, or at the very least that they were irresponsible in ignoring the obvious likelihood that a European-wide war would result from their behaviour. By asking if the actual historical outcome of July-August 1914 was itself improbable, this argument has also raised a matter with which many historians remain very uncomfortable: the role of chance or random events in history, and the present interest among some historians in whether counterfactual history has a serious role in historical studies.[22]

VII. New (and Revived) Theories

There are few historians who take seriously the German propaganda position of July-August 1914 that Great Britain was responsible for starting the war; but one of the most valuable examples of a *good* controversy has recently been generated by the British naval historian Nicholas Lambert, in his book *Planning Armageddon*.[23] Taking its narrative well into 1915, this book argues that the British had planned in some detail to take advantage of changes in international finance and shipping in the event of war, to destabilise and collapse German finances in a matter of weeks through naval 'economic warfare' restricting trade, and so win a short war chiefly by naval power, with the despatch of the British Expeditionary Force as a secondary and almost irrelevant matter. It is further argued that this ambitious British plan backfired when it was implemented in August 1914, proving so successful that it nearly destabilised the British, American and global trading financial structure as well, and had to be abandoned in favour of a more conventional 'blockade' (the British never declared a blockade of Germany in the legal sense).

Lambert's thesis is valuable for highlighting the several different historians' perspectives that presently exist on the same events: the naval historians' account of the blockade; the social, economic and cultural historians' account of the impact of the blockade on Germany; and the political and military historians' account of the relationship between the blockade and the defeat of the German Army in the West in 1918; all overlaid with the considerable propaganda programmes on all sides, which still remain largely neglected areas for research. It is probably beyond the scope of any one historian to possess expert

[22] See *Stephen Badsey*: If It Had Happened Otherwise: First World War Exceptionalism in Counterfactual History. In: *Jessica Meyer (ed.):* British Popular Culture and the First World War London 2008; *Jeremy Black*: What If?: Counterfactualism and the Problem of History. London 2008; and for a critical dismissal of the possibility *Richard J. Evans*: Altered Pasts. New York 2014.

[23] *Nicholas A. Lambert*: Planning Armageddon: British Economic Warfare and the First World War. Cambridge Mass. 2012; this makes an interesting comparison with *Watson*: Ring of Steel (Note 20).

knowledge of all these fields, which strongly suggests the need for a unified approach. It is also significant that Lambert has argued that the British failure to create a unified ministry or political institution to direct this form of economic warfare, together with a corresponding failure to create an institutional memory and official history or record, led to its being neglected until his own re-discovery of its importance. The same argument could be made for British propaganda, which together with the naval blockade were held by the German stab-in-the-back myth (*Dolchstosslegende*) to have been the two decisive (and illegal or immoral) Allied weapons. Again, this suggests the need for a unified and comparative approach. It may also be observed in passing that, although the land warfare and the naval warfare of the First World War has been increasingly understood in these much wider contexts, the history of air warfare, an almost entirely new form of manufacture and technology developed during the war, although it has attracted the attention of historians interested in its mythology and fictional representation, otherwise remains stuck in an apparently endless repetition of the war of the 'Aces' and the story of Baron von Richthofen.

The gaps and problems already noted in the historical record of the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire have also prompted for the centenary a revival and re-examination of possible culpability for the outbreak of the First World War. Sean McMeekin has placed responsibility squarely on the Russian Empire, or more exactly on its foreign minister Sergei Sazanov. McMeekin's thesis is that for more than a century before 1914 France and Great Britain were the two greatest opponents of Russian expansion, but that the diplomatic revolution of 1902-7 presented Russia with a historic opportunity in July 1914 to provoke a European war, in which France and Britain would fight Germany, leaving Russia with its best chance for an expansionist war against the Ottoman Empire which broke out in November, with the object of securing Constantinople and other territory.[24] Although this account continues up to the Russian revolution, in a second book McMeekin follows only the day-by-day crisis of July 1914, and concludes dramatically that not only were the Russians' chiefly to blame, but that the German political and military high command fell 'kicking and screaming' into an Austrian trap that pulled them into the war.[25] All recent accounts of the July-August crisis have stressed the incoherence and unreality of Austro-Hungarian decision-making.

[24] *Sean McMeekin*: The Russian Origins of the First World War. Cambridge Mass 2011; McMeekin's thesis would evoke more confidence if he did not describe David Lloyd George as a 'Unionist' politician (215).
[25] *Sean McMeekin*: July 1914: Countdown to War. London 2103; the quotation is on 405.

The book that has provoked the most popular interest for the commemoration of the outbreak of the war, and a very interesting challenge to the post-Fischer consensus, has been Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* (*Die Schlafwandler*), which has become a particular bestseller in Germany and also in Austria.[26] In a stimulating argument, Clark has gone back to the structural position of the 1920s and 1930s: that no country's government was without fault, and that therefore a moral equivalence and shared responsibility may be attributed to them all. The effect of this revived argument is actually to shift blame away from Berlin, emphasising the brutality and instability of the Serbian state in 1914, the incoherence of Austria-Hungary, the close links between France and Russia, and the ambiguous position of Great Britain, leaving the higher rulers of Germany as only one group of error-makers among many. Clark explains his title on his last page, stating with disarming honesty that his thesis cannot explain the decisions for war in rational terms, suggesting that 'they knew it, but did they really feel it?' and that 'the protagonists of 1914 were sleepwalkers, watchful but unseeing'.[27] Putting aside these metaphysical musing, it is a well-known principle that if a theory cannot explain the evidence, then it is not the evidence that is at fault. It has already been suggested that Clark's thesis is 'brilliant but flawed', and that in reviving the idea that all sides were to blame for the outbreak of the war he has not just returned to a previously discarded theory, but actually disregarded the considerable body of evidence that has led to its being abandoned.[28] What is much more disturbing, in terms of cultures of remembrance, is that the immense popularity in Germany and Austria of this revival of the structural approach of no-one being to blame suggests a continuing need for the present-day people of those countries to be personally absolved for responsibility for an event with which they have no actual connection, and which their commemorative culture has badly misunderstood. The handful of (mostly) men who made the decision for war in July-August 1914 are long dead, and the war that they began was not – in itself and automatically – the catastrophe that was shortly to become the Great War of 1914-1918.

VIII. Conclusion

Within months of the war's outbreak, it became evident that the major powers had to do two things: to outfight their enemies but also to outlast them, hence the intimate connection

[26] *Christopher Clark*: The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914. London 2012 / Die Schlafandler. Wie Europa in den Ersten Weltkrieg zog. München 2013.
[27] *Clark*: The Sleepwalkers (Note 26) 562.
[28] *John C. G. Röhl*: Goodbye to all that (again)? The Fischer thesis, the new revisionism and the meaning of the First World War. International Affairs. 91.1 (2015), 153-166.

between their armed forces and their home societies in prosecuting the war. Historians now use the term 're-mobilisation' to describe the successive processes whereby the German, French, British and even Russian governments sought to direct their industry and populations to continue the war. The essential components of fighting power, *matériel* and firepower on one side, morale and societal cohesion on the other, were complementary rather than as separate. For all major powers, the crisis year came in 1917, and by the end of that year the armies and navies that had *not* mutinied and the countries that had *not* collapsed into revolt or revolution had all shown remarkable resilience. In addition to the collapse of Imperial Russia, there were significant mutinies in the French, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman armies, and in the German Imperial Navy. The extent of the collapse of the German Army in 1918 is a matter for some debate, paradoxically because the scale of that collapse meant that its documentary records are so poor. All of these matters will continue to be the subjects for historical investigation, and proposed new theories and revisionism, as the anniversary years of the First World War continue through to the end of 2018 and beyond. Recent research is only just starting to answer the questions posed (sometimes rhetorically) by cultural historians in the 1970s: just how the mass of people in all belligerent countries fought, endured and perceived the war. It was previously a cliché that the experience of combat alienated soldiers from civilians, that no-one who had not been a *Frontkampfer* could have any notion of what they had endured. While this was certainly literally true of the First World War, as of all other wars, recent research has stressed the extent to which serving soldiers took their civilian culture with them to war, and the degrees to which their political and military leaders recognised and responded to this.[29] One recent finding which remains controversial, even though the evidence for it appears presently overwhelming and is getting stronger, is that by the middle of the war, the average British civilian, letter-writing, newspaper-reading and cinema going, with a friend or relative serving in the armed forces, had a quite realistic understanding of the nature of the fighting fronts, including the levels of casualties, and yet still broadly supported fighting the war through to a victory. The same may yet be possibly said, with qualifications, of the German or French home fronts, although the levels of state censorship and misleading propaganda appear to have been correspondingly higher. From a distance of a hundred years, this is so very hard for us to understand that some historians have simply rejected or refused to come to terms with it.

[29] See in particular Adrian Gregory: The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War. Oxford 2008; and *Alexander Watson*: Enduring the Great War: Combat, Morale and Collapse in the German and British Armies, 1914-1918. Cambridge 2008.

Such evidence warns us that, although we appear to know so much about them, in our continuing study of the First World War we are dealing with societies utterly unlike our own.